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Charles Horner, Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate: Memories of Empire in a New Global Context

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Charles Horner, *Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate: Memories of Empire in a New Global Context*

Victoria Tin-bor Hui

- 1 Charles Horner, *Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate: Memories of Empire in a New Global Context*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009, 224 pp.

2 Charles Horner's *Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate* addresses the hot topic of China's claim to "peaceful rise." Unlike other similarly titled books, it is more interested in analysing what China's rise means for Chinese than what it means for Western militaries and economies. Horner examines how "China is seeking to assemble a set of lessons from the country's past that can serve as a guide... for China's return to prominence... in the world" (p. 10). He critically assesses lessons that are learned and lessons that are not learned.

3 Chinese leaders have recently advocated "the revival of Chinese civilisation" as "the profound substance of China's peaceful development" (p. 168). Such a call for return to tradition may seem ordinary in the postmodernist world. But the new official line in fact represents a dramatic turnaround from the earlier understanding of Chinese civilisation as the source of all ills among Chinese elites, from the May Fourth era to the Maoist era.

4 In Horner's analysis, the most un-Chinese period of Chinese history is the People's Republic. Marxist-Leninist-Maoism was so Western and "so radical a departure from everything that had come before" (p. 3) that "China and the PRC are not the same thing" (p. 197). The abandonment of Maoist radicalism along with the doctrine of People's War makes the path of peaceful rise a "possibility" (p. 137). But such a future does not naturally follow from Chinese history.

5 It is difficult to predict the future based on the past partly because the past itself has been moulded and remoulded to serve the present and the future. "China once interpreted its own past in the light of yesterday's failures, but now it is coming to a new appreciation of its past in the light of today's successes" (p. 100). To better

understand rising China's place in the world, Chinese are looking back to the heydays of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. The Yuan dynasty, once treated as an era of "failed sinification" (p. 24), is now praised for its integration into a world system. The Ming dynasty, once viewed as an era of "isolation" (pp. 11, 38), is now praised for its budding commercial revolution and even deeper integration with the global economy. The Zheng He fleets, in particular, are glorified as the symbol of China's peaceful rise.

⁶ Horner argues that there are uncomfortable history lessons that should not be glossed over. During the "Pax Mongolica," China was "part of someone else's empire" (p. 185). At the same time, "the Rising China of the Great Khan provides... an intriguing example of the potential for imperial aggrandizement of a China-based regime" (p. 32). During "Ming-era Rising China," the Zheng He fleets engaged in "gunboat diplomacy" (p. 50) very much "like any other imperialist power" (p. 53), even though they made no territorial conquests.

⁷ Horner highlights that Qing history is even more "subversive" (p. 59) and "downright dangerous to the men who run China today" (p. 78). The Qing dynasty is still denounced for bringing "humiliation" to China (p. 12). Yet, during the "Pax Manjurica" in the eighteenth century, Manchu emperors "added close to a million square miles to the China proper that the Ming dynasty had ruled" (p. 56). Not unlike Mongol conquests, Manchu conquests were "understood not... as the enlargement of China as such, but rather as the accretion of ever more and diverse holdings in the Manchus' imperial portfolio" (p. 58). The New Qing History also shows that the Manchu court did not engage in systematic sinicisation; rather, it maintained a unique Manchu identity. In ruling a vast multiethnic empire, the Qing provides "a model of success that presupposes a cosmopolitan, not a nationalist, outlook, a view that is tolerant, ecumenical, pluralist, and decentralized, not one that is overbearing, racist, and chauvinistic" (p. 58).

⁸ Even the Late Qing is not as hopelessly irredeemable as it is depicted in the nationalist narrative. Horner observes that reformers then "saw wealth and power deriving not only from economic development but also from people participating in local government and assuming political responsibility" (p. 78). The author thus wonders "if Sun Yat-sen had not carried out his revolution, the late Qing rulers might have... naturally developed a democratic system without the chaos and bloodshed brought by revolution" (p. 59).

⁹ While the Qing, Republican, and Communist regimes failed one after another at bringing modernity to China, Deng Xiaoping's reforms have finally delivered the Chinese dream of catching up with the West.

¹⁰ But what happens after success? Horner believes that China cannot escape the same spectre of postmodernism that has haunted the Soviet Union and that will surely haunt the United States—or the same interaction between yin and yang that has characterised Chinese history. Thus, the very success at generating power and wealth has also "planted inside the country the seeds of its possible undoing" (p. 194). Rapid economic growth has corroded unity and brought about a de facto scenario of "one country, many systems" (p. 175). In wealthy cities, there is "a dangerously fine line" between the modern and the decadent (p. 142). Even the countryside is "in great disarray" (p. 120).

¹¹ Does this mean that China observers will soon discuss the rise and decline of China? Citing Douglas North, Horner advises Beijing to allow "open-access political markets" as well as "open-access commercial markets" (p. 165). Such a formula is as Western as it

is Chinese, for the Late Qing left behind “a set of blueprints for the recovery of... grandeur in the twenty-first century,” that is, the creation of “an active citizenry” by “a system legitimized by the vote of the people” (p. 79). As this proposal calls on the current leadership “to accelerate its own subversion today in the service of China’s national greatness tomorrow” (p. 165), it is difficult to predict how China’s postmodern fate will turn out.

¹² *Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate* brings together updated and pertinent secondary historical works to offer a sweeping analysis of China’s rise in historical perspective. It is written in highly accessible language and should appeal to general readers as well as college students.